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ABSTRACT

Noting the present state of declining enrollment figures in foreign language education, the future of language instruction is questioned in this address. The author deplores the resultant provincialism resulting from a neoisolationist movement throughout the country in which the English language is seen as the only acceptable medium of cultural expression. He exhorts language teachers to examine the aims, achievements, and present relevance of current language programs while focusing on the need to develop innovative courses, particularly in the area of culture study. (RL)

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WHITHER MODERN LANGUAGES?

An Address By

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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Teachers, you have been deliberating no doubt in your conference here about our role as teachers of modern languages and the place of the foreign language in the school and college today. I want to speak to you briefly about the latter point, as I attempt to answer in some measure a question that concerns us all very cogently at the present time -- "Whither Modern Languages?"

May I commence by reading a translation of Hans Arp's Baobab from the German: (Hans Arp was one of the founders of the Dada Movement, 1916, and Baobab is the African name for the native Apebread Tree, Affenbrotbaum).

And she gave birth to a strong healthy boy
who was named Baobab.
The boy grew and grew,
and did not stop growing
and grew as high as the blue of the sky itself.
Baobab's compatriots liked to look into the eyes
of whomsoever they might be talking to.
But this was no longer possible in the case
of a person as tall as Baobab was.
So they lifted a lot of earth
and dug a chasmic hole,
into which Baobab willingly inserted himself,
for he too found it unbearable
not to be able to look into the eyes
of whomsoever he might be talking to.
The earth they lifted
they threw over the edge of their small star
into the emptiness.
After Baobab had spent
a hundred years in this hole,
he began to disappear.
Every day he grew smaller and smaller,
till at length he disappeared altogether.
Now the inhabitants of the small star
were left with nothing but a chasmic hole
and a narrow strip of land around the hole,
and they looked alternately
into the chasmic hole on their small star
and over the edge of their small star into the emptiness.

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Clearly the language is beautiful, the cadences are musical. But what is the poet saying to us? Most of us will agree that there is symbol and allegory here. Each of us can bring a personal experience to this allegory of the Baobab tree. I hope I do not do violence to the poem if I suggest a parallel with the gigantic smugness of our English-speaking world. We have never stopped growing. There was a time when our neighbors could "look into our eyes" and communicate with us -- "look into our eyes," the windows of our heart or soul. But now "this was no longer possible." Have we almost reached this unhappy state. Will it be necessary to gouge some atomic crater in this world to cut us down to size?

Now you see Hans Arp is pointing his finger directly at us to ask if we are building earth walls about ourselves, isolating and insulating us from our fellowmen, until we dwindle to a non-communicative emptiness. The futility of it all, the poet seems to cry, where cut off from others in our "chasmic hole" with "a narrow strip of land around," we disappear into a nothing; and the other "inhabitants of the small star" can look only "into the chasmic hole" or beyond "into the emptiness." Is this what happens, I ask, if we cut off our language communication with others when we grow too big and smug?

My conscience begins to prick me at this point, for I feel as if I am about to sermonize to those who have come to church. You are here, no doubt, for many and various reasons, but consciously or subconsciously, I imagine there is one reason for our assembling that is common to all, and this is for the mental and spiritual refreshment and recharging of our intellectual batteries that keep us driving on from day to day in our language-teaching pursuits. The strength and encouragement received in our assembling is often underestimated, I think, sometimes by the individual, sometimes by the institution in not always making it financially possible for you to attend. The individual who doesn't bother is either excessively shy (in which case he should see a psychiatrist) or so smug as to think there are no new ideas about language-teaching, or perhaps that he only already has all the answers. Such withdrawal, it seems to me, is the fullfillment of ivory-tower isolation.

Well now, why have we come here? We knew before we came we would probably hear a multitude of truisms and cliches. Indeed for that reason chiefly I feel very humble (but not apologetic) in daring to speak to you about our task and its direction. I say I am not apologetic, because I firmly believe that we must repeat and hear repeated frequently our credo about the teaching of modern languages. In our unity there is strength and the tapping of thisstrength sends us forth with courage and renewed determination to assert and promote the values which we know are to be attained through exploiting another language.

But what came ye out to hear? I can offer only some time-worn truths -- the cliches perhaps which I mentioned. But just possibly I can suggest some new emphases or directions. As I said, we are concerned about the present decline in modern language study in

schools and colleges -- occasioned largely by the removal of language requirements for the B.A. degree, or even for college entrance. In 1958, the year after Sputnik I, we were cheered by governments' attention to, and aid for increased modern language programs. But the enthusiasm seems to have cooled over the last decade. One might ask "Why?" and consider the situation seriously. In 1946, a decade before Sputnik, a survey conducted by the Woman's Home Companion showed that 78 per cent of the average American public favored compulsory modern language instruction in all high schools; 50 per cent favored compulsory instruction in the elementary schools. The general public feels the need for and desirability of language instruction for all in our schools and colleges. More often than not the public gets its way, but not so in education patterns, it appears. Opposition to compulsory study has been strongly voiced as we know by students, but they have been aided by colleagues and administrators within our own ranks. The danger lurks within! There is not one of us, I am sure, but would prefer to teach only those who elect a language and presumably want to learn. Such students are well motivated and are a joy to us. But are we satisfied to let the matter drift? What is happening to the quality of our university degree? How do our students compare with their counterparts in England, France, Germany, Russia? Are we capitulating to forces in our countries which are deliberately trying to weaken our educational structures? Local struggles have been lost here and there (as on my own campus), but this is no reason for us to cry "Too Late!" and give up the battle! If so, we may be guilty of short-changing generations to come. Let us remember, and learn from, the brave group of Latin and Greek scholars who still carry on!

It is our duty also as teachers of modern languages to examine our aims, achievements, and present relevance -- I couldn't escape that current jargon word -- in what we teach. Our aims are pretty well dictated (as far as our daily activity is concerned) by traditional practice. For example, the student must have one, two, or sometimes three years of modern language for university entrance; mostly two (or even three) years implied completion of an elementary grammar book and one or two readers. Or if the student begins his language in university, he has traditionally been expected to complete the same program in his first year. The second year has usually been devoted to a review grammar and some advanced reading ability. At this point, the student is supposed to be able to read the foreign language efficiently with the aid of a dictionary. Does this not sound like a requirement consciously or subconsciously dictated by our own Graduate Schools to meet the language reading test? Similarly in our amassing of credits for a Major or Honors degree in Modern Languages, have we not struggled every hour of the four years to finish the reading-survey requirements. I repeat, perhaps we should re-examine our aims and present relevance. How well do we satisfy the really deep hunger of the student to "know" the foreign person, his nature and his culture? Are we, or have we been, using all means at our disposal to bring a total awareness of the foreign spirit, as well as the word, to our students? Well, dear colleagues, it is heartening to read of new developments such as these:

At the University of California at Santa Barbara -- A French course using full-length feature films (3 each quarter) with filmscript as text;
At Allegheny College -- A Freshman Seminar on German poetry,
At the Universities of Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Texas, and Arkansas Polytech -- A new title listing "Courses in Civilization";
At the Universities of California (Riverside), Kent State, Washington (St. Louis), Texas, here at Western Washington for several years, and our own University of Washington -- courses in "German Civilization";
At the University of Pittsburgh -- A "Major" in "German Language and Civilization" (note the new dimension).

Moreover, Literatures in Translation are growing rapidly (through which incidentally many are attracted to study of the original) at Rice University, Wisconsin, Clark, Ripon, Colorado College, City College (N.Y.), Michigan State, Colgate, Iowa, Kentucky, Detroit, and (I add proudly) in Classics, Russian, and German at the University of Victoria as well as several others.

I believe firmly that Literature Courses in Translation should be given only by a Modern Language Teacher who knows the language and culture of the original. Probably only he can interpret the original spirit rightly.

Comparative Literature and Interdepartmental Courses are now coming into their own -- all good signs of a growing awareness and/or demand to probe another culture in our quest for international understanding.

At the University of Victoria we have introduced (in English) a course on German Music & Literature.
Kansas' French Department offers a course on Theatre and Philosophy called "Existentialism."
University of California (Berkeley) has introduced a course called "Sturm und Drang" dealing with German, Music & Drama.

These are a few new directions. The horizons are unlimited.

I do not need to remind this audience of the purpose lying behind this interpretation of spirit. It is to us one of those cliches, now to speak of international peace, of tolerance, of friendship. We know that these are the concomitants of effective and deep language study. But have we convinced our colleagues of this truth? Here, it seems to me, lies our fundamental problem and task. Because the values I speak of are abstract and non-measurable, as in a calorimeter, ours is truly a formidable task in a scientific-oriented society. How can we demonstrate the humanizing and humanitarian effect of knowing another's language? Through our experiences, we know the truth in such a claim. None of us will ever forget our first awareness of the warmth and trust inspired after we could

express a sincere Bonos dies, bon jour, or Guten Tag. And we know how this mutual trust has increased in direct proportion to our mastery of the foreign tongue. I know that foreign language teachers are not likely to press any atomic war buttons. (The troubles in my country, i.e., in Quebec, are caused by fanatic Quebecois, not by the genuinely bilingual, tolerant citizens.) In other words, tolerance increases with the growing awareness of another culture. I am reminded of an old story:

> In a cemetery an Englishman and a Chinese were tending neighboring graves. The Englishman had set out a beautiful bouquet of roses, as he noticed the Chinese placing a bowl of rice on the grave he was visiting. "When do you think your friend will come up to eat it?" asked the Englishman patronizingly. Came the prompt reply from the Chinese, "Same time your flen come up smelle flowers!"

Professor Mario Pei, the eminent philologist and scholar, has reminded us that both a great honor and a moral trust have been accorded the modern language teacher. I think perhaps we have always associated honor and moral trust with the Classics teachers, those who kept us close to the Aristotelian and Ciceronian precepts of balance, judgment, proportion. Maybe we have not fully recognized or realized our similar role. Or have we been guilty too often, perhaps in concerning ourselves more with the ethical dative instead of the ethical mores? Please do not misunderstand me: as a modern language teacher, I am well aware of the need for understanding the letter well, and the need for accuracy and beauty in language per se. But what if we stop there and do not look for the spirit within the body? This, I believe, would be the first betrayal of that trust of which Professor Pei speaks.

We have a moral trust also as we deal with the sensitive human fibre from which language springs, either as we feed in the calories of strength and correctness, or as we take our scalpels of tongue or red pencil to cut away cancerous error. These things must be done as carefully as a psychiatrist handles his patients so as to encourage our students and not damage their id irreparably.

How well Dr. John H. Fisher, our Executive Secretary of MLA expressed this point in his Commencement Address in August of this year at Middlebury College. He said: (See ADFL, Vol. II, No. 1., Sept. 70)

> Language teaching is to my mind the most psychologically complex activity in the educational spectrum. Language is the chalice in which we carry our identities. When I am talking to English teachers, I remind them that every theme they correct is an exercise in psycho-analysis. When we criticize the way Johnny expresses himself, or spells, or punctuates, we are attacking the hidden depths where Johnny lives. As editor of PMLA, I can tell you that no scholar ever grows so distinguished or so sophisticated that he is not tender about his writing.

Is what Dr. Fisher says not doubly true of our hesitant and self-conscious speakers and writers in the foreign tongue? Perhaps we could effectively apply some of the subtle 1930 German psychology of Kraft durch Freude ("Strength through Joy"), but for positive purposes. Here I want to pay tribute to a truly great professor and teacher, now Emerita, of The University of Washington, Dr. Felice Ankele. I think Dr. Ankele never began an elementary or secondary class hour without the joyful opening experience of folksong. I am sure that exercises with German strong verbs were much more happily and relaxedly undertaken in the Stimmung (atmosphere) of joy created by Dr. Ankele. Let us take stock! How many of us are STILL oppressed with a twinge of Presbyterian conscience if we stray from the printed word in the book to indulge the cultural and pleasurable joy of song or picture, travelogue or folk-dance, etc.?

I am rather certain also that Professor Pei means that we are honored in being chosen as instruments to interpret (as do the classicists) the culture and manner of thinking of another people -- the votive offerings of flowers or rice! Hence too, a moral responsibility! What if we fail to penetrate the spirit or bring appreciation and comprehension of a "foreign" ethic? In other words, if we become bogged down and spend our every teaching minute on paradigms or declensions, we would surely be most guilty betrayers of a trust. The point is clear. Are we as the English-speaking majority of the world so smug in our superiority as to think ours is the only culture worthy of contacting? As long ago as 1946 the World Conference of the Teaching Profession held at Endicott, New York, agreed that the whole world needs one common language to draw us closely together, and affirmed that English should be that language, but that same body representing all the major tongues of the world also stipulated the need of a second language for our education, not just for communication purposes (this is where we have too often stopped in our defense arguments) but for the promotion of international understanding. The acquiring of a knowledge of cultural differences must surely be a premise to the appreciation of those differences (the votive offerings of flowers or rice) in men and nations. And this second step in approach to alleviating the world's ills of misunderstanding and strife must lead to the highest educational goal of all, the appreciation of all human, and humanizing, values and the differences and nuances among nations. You will remember that Huxley, the great scientist of last century, said, "The aim of all education is to know a good man when you see one." I am convinced that we shall judge best any man's worth only when we have conversed with him at length and in his own tongue.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I am coming perilously near to the sermonizing and to the cliches. Wither modern languages then? I do not have a crystal ball, but I do know the answer depends on you and me. First it depends on our conviction of values and our continued and continuing struggle to demonstrate those values to others. (I hope in some small measure I have contributed to that enthusiasm and determination which you should find in your mutual deliberations here.) And secondly, it depends (even more so) on what we give our students. As I have tried to suggest, it must, through deep

appreciation of another's culture provide a lasting and deeply gratifying experience of international human understanding.

Let us try to write the counterpart of Baobab. Let us continue to "look into the eyes" and, therefore, the hearts of other men on this small star, and not dig the chasmic hole of destruction or isolation. Let us learn to love the Oriental brother through sensitive appreciation of his delicate poesy, let us truly appreciate the intellectual strength of our Israeli and Jewish friends through an understanding of their language so laced with powerful and imaginative figure of speech, let us become perhaps more attractive personally with new savoir faire, and joie di vivre, assimilated through the music of our Romance languages, or stronger and more balanced through the philosophic and moral emphases of Germanic literature, and so on.

We may never achieve all these aims individually, or for many others in our lifetime, but we can still be pioneers. I am but one small voice crying in the wilderness of today's unhappy world, but again I say to you my friends and colleagues, "Prepare the way...make the paths straight with understanding!"

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